XULAneXUS

Volume 7 | Issue 2 Article 7

4-1-2010

An Attributional Analysis of Personality Traits: An Assessment of Actor Conscientiousness on Internality

Xaver N. Readus

XULAneXUS: Xavier University of Louisiana's Undergraduate Research Journal.
Research Manuscript. Vol. 7, No. 2, April 2010. 16-27.

An Attributional Analysis of Personality Traits: An Assessment of Actor Conscientiousness on Internality

Xavier N. Readus, Biology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Elliott Hammer, Psychology

Abstract:

Making meaning of our individual behavior, as well as the behavior of others, is integral to how humans function in society, yet this fact is frequently overlooked. The process we use to explain the behavior we observe in others and ourselves is a central social psychology concept known as attribution theory (e.g., Weiner, 2008). Because no previous studies have investigated the conscientiousness of the observer, the aim of the present study was to determine whether observer personality influenced the attribution process. First, I considered whether a relationship exists between locus of control, internal or external, and the level of conscientiousness in the observer. Second, I examined the observer's perception of stability and controllability. In the study, each participant-observer responded to questions that correlated with four different scenarios to measure locus of control, controllability and stability. As a measure of observer conscientiousness, each participant responded to 20 items modified from questions on the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP). Results indicated a strong negative correlation between locus of control and conscientiousness. In addition, responses on stability and controllability questions were negatively correlated. Future research should look at the impact of other participant personality characteristics upon attribution. Attribution research could potentially provide an explanation as to why many people decide to help others.

Key Terms: Attribution Theory, Conscientiousness, Empathy, Helping

Imagine a crowded bar where a woman notices that a man is lying on a bench apparently passed out. The woman, the observer, notices other people at the gathering, who regard the troubled man with disgust, and they continue with their social endeavors. Although tempted to do the same, this observer continues to contemplate the situation and consider the events that might have led the man to this state. She looks at the positioning of the man, considers the positioning awkward, and decides to make a closer examination of the scene. Upon closer examination, she notices a cup sitting a few inches away from the man. She peers into the cup and notices white powder floating in the beverage. Her conscientious behavior prompts her to call out immediately for someone to get help. The conscientious effort of the woman is a hypothetical example of how making meaning of our individual behavior, as well as the behavior of others, is integral to how humans interact with others in society, yet this fact is frequently overlooked. The process we use to explain the behavior we observe in others and ourselves is a central concept of social psychology known as attribution theory (e.g., Weiner, 2008).

Attribution Theory provides the theoretical rationale to explain the responses that observers have to the action and behavior of others. According to this theory, the perceived cause of an action will influence observer response. Attribution Theory characterizes the perceived causes of behavior into two distinct categories: internal and external (Lepine & Dyne, 2001). Internal attribution refers to crediting the cause of observed behavior to dispositional factors or factors inherent within the person-actor, or target. Intelligence and personality are examples of internal attributions for the behavior of an actor. External attribution refers to the observer ascribing the cause of target behavior to situational factors. For example, two situational factors that an observer might perceive to cause failure of a job are task difficulty and weather. Attribution Theory suggests that people want to understand why Person A fails at a certain task but Person B succeeds at it. Interestingly, observers tend to attribute the cause of their own success to internal attributions but the cause of their failure to external attributions; however, in observing the action of the actor, the observer often attributes the cause of actor failure to more internal attributions (Malle, 1999). Thus, it seems that in applying the attributional process, we protect our self-esteem and self-concept, thereby, enhancing our long-term psychological well-being (McCrea, 2008).

The fundamental principle of Attribution Theory can be analyzed in terms of three dimensions: locus of control, controllability, and stability. The initial determination to attribute the cause of a behavior to internal or external attribution is termed locus of control. In several studies on explaining the reasons people help others, the findings of Weiner (1995, 2008) persuasively support the differences between internal and external locus of control. When an observer judges the failure of a target to be due to external causes (e.g., luck or task difficulty), the observer feels empathy or sympathy and subsequently does not judge the target to be responsible for his or her failures (Malle, 1999; Weiner, 1995). On the contrary, when observers perceive failure of a task to be caused by internal factors (e.g., low ability or low motivation), they engage in efforts to attain more information and make further deductions to find the core cause of failure. Hence, the initial perceived cause of a behavior by an observer as either externally or internally caused will influence the future feeling, cognitions, and behavior of the observer (Malle, 1999; Weiner, 1995). An internal attributional decision, compared with an external attribution, leads to causal inquiry into the behavior of the actor, whereas an external attributional decision does not (Lepine & Dyne, 2001).

Controllability refers to the decision that the behavior exhibited by another person can be avoided (controllable) or that the causes of the circumstance are beyond the control of the person (uncontrollable). In a failed situation, an observer will assess the controllability of the actor in order to determine future behavior (Malle, 1999). If the observer attributes the low performance of the actor to factors without controllability, the observer will respond with empathy, thereby increasing the likelihood of his providing help to the other (Dijker & Koomen, 2003). However, if the observer believes the actor could have succeeded in the situation, hence avoiding failure, the observer will become angry (Graham, 1991). After evaluating controllability, the observer assesses the stability of a situation. Stability refers to whether the cause of an event is static (stable) or changes over time and circumstance (unstable). For example, if a student fails a test in a particularly difficult subject, then the cause of a failing grade on a test is stable because the subject difficulty will most likely not change. However, if the cause of student failure is due to contraction of an illness several days before the exam, the cause is perceived as unstable and the

failure may not continue in the future. Thus, in assessing stability, the observer assesses the likelihood that intercession can alter future performance (Weiner, 2008). Struthers, Weiner, and Alfred (1998) found that observer intervention is high if the cause of low performance is unstable. In such cases, the observer perceives that helping the person has utility. However, observer intervention is low if the cause of the situation is stable.

Extensive research on controllability and stability has led to intriguing results. Research has found that it is only necessary to examine the controllability and stability of a behavior if we attribute the cause of failure to an internal locus of control (Weiner 1995, 2008). For example, if a fellow student does not complete his part of a group assignment, we will have to attribute his failure either to circumstance or to some external stimulus. If we find out that his mother passed away a week before, we will attribute his failure to an external locus of control. Therefore, there is no need to ponder whether the situation will continue in the future or if he can control the situation because both of those queries were answered when the cause of the behavior was attributed to an external locus of control.

Researchers have characterized personality traits using numerous methods; however, the most widely used and agreed upon characterization is a framework called the "Five-Factor Model" (FFM) of personality, or simply the "Big Five." This model conceptualizes personality as having five factors: openness, neuroticism, extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The emphasis of the current paper is on observer conscientiousness. A person on the upper end of the conscientiousness spectrum is characterized as a meticulous planner. A highly conscientious person has such qualities as being organized, thorough, and painstaking. Those who are on the low end of the conscientiousness spectrum tend to be undependable, unreliable, lackadaisical, aimless, lazy, and eager to quit (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The average person lies between the upper and lower ends of the spectrum. Studies suggest that observers can accurately assess such actor personality traits (Pansu & Jouffre, 2008).

The purpose of the present study was two-fold. First, I considered whether there is a correlation between the degree of internality of locus of control and the conscientiousness level in the observer. Second, I examined the perception of observer stability and controllability in order to understand the observer's deduction that an actor's poor performance was caused by an internal or external locus of control.

Although previous research offers a foundation for the present study, it neglects to examine several aspects I implemented here. Taggar and Neubert (2008) noted that future research should assess the impact of observer personality traits on the attribution process thus examining the future behavior of the observer. In addition, Lepine and Dyne (2001) noted that characteristics of the helper were not included in their study, and they suggested conscientiousness as one that would be intriguing to examine. Thus, the present study examined aspects that past research neglected to consider.

With no previous studies investigating the conscientiousness of the observer, the aim of the present study was to determine whether observer personality influences locus of control. Specifically, I predicted that observers on the higher end of the conscientiousness spectrum would exert more cognitive effort to understand the situation of a low performer, thereby

becoming more likely to attribute failure to a more external cause and thus provide help to the actor. Hence, I expected a strong positive correlation between conscientiousness and locus of control.

Method

Participants

The participants were psychology students from a small historically Black university in the South. Participants gave consent to participate in the experiment on a voluntary basis. Some participants may have received course credit, although alternative methods of course credit were provided. The consent form provided a coherent general explanation of the study. The necessary procedures were described in some detail; participants were informed that confidentiality was of the utmost importance. In addition, participants were informed of all possible risks involved in their participating in the study such as the psychological and emotional stress associated with understanding themselves better.

Materials

To measure the three attributional elements (locus of control, controllability, and stability), participants received a compilation of four scenarios. These scenarios involved the description of college student plights (see Appendix A). One scenario was the following:

> An upperclassman and his /her two friends see a smaller and weaker freshman student alone in front of the cafeteria at a university that they attend. They begin to talk badly about the freshman student's clothes.

Attribution Measures

To measure the causal dimensions of attribution, the present study utilized self-reports because one of the primary concerns with other measuring constructs is that they are attitudinal and perceptual (Taggar & Neubert, 2008). Locus of control, controllability, and stability were measured by a total of four-question responses on four different scenarios (continuous). Scores ranged from 0 through 4 in each dimension.

For locus of control, participants indicated A for internal attribution and B for external attribution on each scenario (See Appendix A). One such question was the following: "Is the teasing a result of the freshman student's attitudes, personality, character, or nature (A) OR is the cause of the teasing because of an outside action, force, environment, or some other situation (B)?" On perceived controllability, participants indicated "yes" for controllable or "no" for uncontrollable on each scenario (See Appendix A). One such question was the following: "Could the rude comments made by the upperclassmen have been avoided (controlled) by the freshman student?" For observer perception of stability, participants indicated "yes" for stable or "no" for unstable for their perceptions on each scenario. One such question was the following: "Will the student continue to be picked on in the future?"

Conscientiousness Measure

To measure conscientiousness of the observer, 20 modified questions from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) were administered at the beginning of all the surveyed materials (See Appendix B). One sample query was the following: "I pay attention to details."

The choices ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree on a 4-point Likert scale. An average of all the scores was calculated. Scores ranged from 0 through 4.

Procedure

The current study utilized a non-experimental method. A notice was posted in the psychology department of Xavier University alongside other researcher studies that students could voluntarily participate in until the desired number of participants was reached. The current procedure closely modeled Struthers, Weiner, and Allred (1998) with one major change. Their survey included additional measurements of the observer based on poor performer personality. My study incorporated some of these same measurements but also included analysis of observer personality. Once the participant signaled that he or she had finished the surveys, the participant was given the option to be debriefed orally or received a written debriefing statement.

Results

The study used a 1-tailed Pearson's correlation coefficient to analyze the relationship between locus of control, stability, conscientiousness, and controllability. Refer to Table 1 in Appendix C below for significant data for variables of interests. A negative correlation was noted between conscientiousness and attribution. A participant-observer higher in conscientiousness was more likely to perceive the cause of the situation as having an internal locus of control. A participant higher in conscientiousness was more likely to believe that the observer could have controlled or avoided the situation. A strong positive correlation was found between locus of control and controllability, indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. A participant's score on locus of control was related to the perceived amount of control the actor had over the situation. A negative correlation was found between stability and locus of control. A participant who perceived the cause of the situation as having an external locus of control also judged that the situation would continue in the future. Responses on stability questions and controllability questions were negatively correlated. The participants who thought that an actor could have avoided the circumstance tended to believe the cause of the problem would continue in the future and vice versa.

Discussion

Researchers have studied the process in which people choose to help others for more than 35 years; however, they have not identified predictors of helping based on observer personality. Therefore, the present model can contribute to the employment of attributional theory as a framework for identifying predictors of helping that have not been considered to date. I predicted that as conscientiousness level increased, the likelihood of an external attributional decision would increase. The hypothesis was not supported in this study; however, other intriguing findings were noted. Contrary to the hypothesis, participants higher in conscientiousness perceived the cause of the situation was due to an internal locus of control. People at the higher end of the conscientiousness spectrum are naturally more meticulous in their work; thus, they could expect the same effort from others. Participants at the lower end of the conscientiousness spectrum were more likely to perceive the situation as beyond the control of the actor. In contrast, participants at the higher end of the conscientiousness spectrum believed the situation was avoidable. Participants higher in conscientiousness probably felt that if they are painstaking and meticulous, other people possess this same ability.

Participants on the lower end of the conscientiousness spectrum, on the other hand, were more likely to experience the failed situations described in the study; therefore, they were more prone to characterize the situation as uncontrollable. Participants who thought the failed situation was controllable made an internal attributional decision, or internal locus of control. Participants who perceived the situation as unavoidable made an external attributional decision. Prior studies have already concluded that controllability can elicit a response of anger if the situation is perceived as controllable. On the other hand, if the situation is uncontrollable, the observer will respond in sympathy (Weiner, 1995). However, the coupling of the locus of control with circumstantial controllability may explain why in some situations people give charitably, but in others, they do not. It also implies that the perceived locus of control may be a significant factor in the willingness of the observer to help others.

Another intriguing finding was the relationship between stability and controllability. Participants who evaluated the situation as uncontrollable also perceived that the situation would continue in the future. Participants who thought the situation was controllable also assumed the circumstance would not continue in the future. These findings provide a possible explanation to why people decide to help. If a person perceives a circumstance as uncontrollable, then he or she will assume it will not continue in the future, thus creating an emotional response and helping behavior. This result supports the claim that attribution theory has played a key role in understanding the success and failure of getting someone to help (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer & Weiner, 2004)

My study had several limitations. To verify that the survey was eliciting the right responses, a pilot study was conducted before the actual study. Several participants in this study had a hard time understanding some of the survey questions. Therefore, in the actual study, participants may have had difficulty understanding some of the queries. The different locations of the research sessions may have altered participant answers to some extent. In the first session, the wind continually hit the window producing a loud noise, possibly causing a distraction. In the second session, there were no windows and no loud distractions. Because a non-experimental method was used, this study cannot argue causality between the variables.

Future research should consider looking at other participant personality characteristics (e.g. agreeableness) and observe the impact that trait has on the attribution stages. This may show observer characteristics do in fact relate to locus of control. Future research should also consider conducting similar research across different dimensions or settings, for example, a scenario could describe a team of individuals with one low performing actor. Taggar and Neubert (2004) suggest that research in a different setting may provoke more severe reactions in the participants. In doing so, the present study would be extended to other aspects of life, thus expounding on the limited information about the human psyche.

References

Costa, P., & McCrae, R. (1992). Multiple uses for longitudinal personality data. *European Journal of Personality*, *6*(2), 85-102. doi:10.1002/per.2410060203.

Dijker, A., & Koomen, W. (2003). Extending Weiner's attribution-emotion model of stigmatization of ill persons. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *25*, 51-68.

Graham, S. (1991). A review of attribution theory in achievement contexts. *Educational Psychology Review*, *3*, 5-39.

Lepine, J., & Dyne, L. (2001). Peer responses to low performers: An attributional model of helping in the context of groups. *Academy of Management Review*, *26*, 67-84.

Malle, B. (1999). How people explain behavior: A new theoretical framework. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *3*, 23-48.

McCrea, S. (2008). Self-handicapping, excuse making, and counterfactual thinking: Consequences for self-esteem and future motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*, 274-292.

Pansu, P., & Jouffre, S. (2008). Attributional perspectives on academic judgments. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *23*, 379-384.

Rudolph, U., Roesch, S., Greitemeyer, T., & Weiner, B. (2004). A meta-analytic review of help giving and aggression from an attributional perspective: Contributions to a general theory of motivation. *Cognition & Emotion*, *18*, 815-848.

Struthers, C., Weiner, B., & Allred, K. (1998). Effects of causal attributions on personnel decisions: A social motivation perspective. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *20*, 155-166.

Taggar, S., & Neubert, M. (2004). The Impact of Poor Performers on Team Outcomes: An Empirical Examination of Attribution Theory. *Personnel Psychology*, *57*, 935-968.

Taggar, S., & Neubert, M. (2008). A cognitive (attributions)-emotion model of observer reactions to free-riding poor performers. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *22*, 167-177.

Weiner, B. (1995). Lessons from the past. *Psychological Inquiry*, *6*, 319-321.

Weiner, B. (2000). Attributional thoughts about consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *27*, 382-387.

Weiner, B. (2008). On theoretical coexistence versus theoretical integration. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *23*, 433-438.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Dr. Elliott Hammer. He helped me through the entire process of this paper. Truly, without him there would be no research paper. Through sickness and health, he was a true encouragement and support. I am very appreciative of his caring support.

Appendix A
Scenarios

Instructions: Please read each scenario and circle the response that is most in line with your viewpoint (opinion).

Scenario #1: Bullying in the gym
An upperclassman and his /her two friends see a smaller and weaker freshman student alone in front of the cafeteria at a university that they attend. They begin to talk badly about the freshman student's clothes.

1. Is the teasing a result of the freshman student's attitudes, personality, character, or nature (A) OR is the cause of the teasing because of an outside action, force, environment, or some other situation (B)?

2. Could the rude comments made by the upperclassmen have been avoided (controlled) by the freshman student? Yes No

3. Will the student continue to be picked on in future? Yes No

Scenario #2: Picked last
Students at a university are picking teams to play a game of basketball (or some other intramural sport) in the gym. One student is left.

1. Is the cause of the student being picked last because of the students' attitudes, personality, character, or nature (A) OR is the cause of the student being picked last because of an outside action, force, environment, or some other situation (B)?

2. Could being chosen last have been controlled (avoided) by the student? Yes No

3. Will the student continue to be picked last in future? Yes No

Scenario #3: New student at school
A new student that has transferred from a school out of the country walks into a college class about three weeks into the semester. His/her English is not very good yet, and he/she has a strong accent. The professor requires that all students introduce themselves to the class so the student says his or her name and some of the students begin to laugh.

1. Is the cause of the student being laughed at because of the students' attitudes, personality, character, or nature (A) OR is the cause of the laughing because of an outside action, force, environment, or some other situation (B)?

2. Could being laughed at have been controlled (avoided) by the student? Yes No

3. Will the student continue to be laughed at in future? Yes No

Scenario #4: Looking different

There is a college student that no one talks to or hangs around. Other students avoid contact with the student even in the cafeteria.

1. Is the cause of the student's aloneness because of the students' attitudes, personality, character, or nature (A) OR is the cause of being alone because of an outside action, force, environment, or some other situation (B)?

2. Could being alone be controlled by the student? Yes No

3. Will the student continue to be alone in future? Yes No

Appendix B
Assessment Scale

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about your behavior. If you strongly agree, circle **SA**. If you agree with the statement, circle **A**. If you disagree, circle **D**. If you strongly disagree, circle **SD**.

1. I am always prepared.	SA	A	D	SD
2. I need a push to get started.	SA	A	D	SD
3. I get chores done right away.	SA	A	D	SD
4. I do not put my mind on a task at hand.	SA	A	D	SD
5. I make plans, and stick to them.	SA	A	D	SD
6. I mess things up.	SA	A	D	SD
7. I do things according to a plan.	SA	A	D	SD
8. I am a perfectionist in my work.	SA	A	D	SD
9. I do not see things through.	SA	A	D	SD
10. I waste my time.	SA	A	D	SD
11. I follow through with my plans.	SA	A	D	SD
12. I find it difficult to get down to work.	SA	A	D	SD
13. I do just enough work to get by.	SA	A	D	SD
14. I finish what I start.	SA	A	D	SD
15. I shirk my duties.	SA	A	D	SD
16. I complete tasks successfully.	SA	A	D	SD
17. I leave things unfinished.	SA	A	D	SD
18. I carry out my plans.	SA	A	D	SD
19. I make a mess of things.	SA	A	D	SD
20. I pay attention to details.	SA	A	D	SD

Appendix C

Table 1

Statistically significant Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients for variables of interest ($p < .05$)

		Attribution Internality	Attribution Stability
Conscientiousness	*r* *df* *p*	-.36 20 <.05	
Attribution Controllability	*r* *df* *p*	.46 20 <.05	-.518 20 <.05
Attribution Stability	*r* *df* *p*	-.43 20 <.05	